



**The Ramsden Sermon 2021
Great St Mary's, The University Church, Cambridge,
Pentecost Sunday 23 May 2021.**

**Preached by The Most Reverend Justin Welby,
Archbishop of Canterbury.**

“Come Holy Spirit and once again set our hearts on fire with the flames of your love. “

Thank you, Vice Chancellor, for your invitation to preach here today and thank you Adrian for your hospitality. It is an immense privilege to be invited to give a University sermon, but I must confess to feeling seriously underdressed in this company – not normally a problem in my job.

As you may have seen in the blurb in the service sheet, the Ramsden Sermon was founded to be given on church extension overseas especially in the Commonwealth of Nations.

William Stringfellow, a theologian, social activist and lawyer in Harlem, New York in the 1960s and 70s, wrote “at Pentecost, ecstatic utterance means the emancipation of human beings from the bonds of nation, culture, race, language, ethnicity”¹. Pentecost is a moment of liberation intended for the whole world to use the words of the Spiritual, “free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty I am free at last”. The church is driven by the Holy Spirit to extension as the carrier of freedom. It accepts being driven out or it must accept that it has chosen to go down.

Stringfellow says the principalities and powers of self-regard and vain struggles against death mean that ever too often the church becomes self-protecting, seeking to preserve its own life and losing sight of the faithfulness of God in Christ who sends the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of freedom. God frees, institutions of the church imprison, and the extension of the church becomes a gaol, not a place of dance, of joy and hope.

What can we do about it? In this sermon I want to look at what the last year is doing and where we see the action of God the Holy Spirit, the Spirit given at Pentecost, in the world around and in the church today.

First, I should say that long before this role, my own encounter with church extension originated in two experiences. The first was in Kenya in 1974 where I was teaching in a Harambee (self-help) secondary school 70 miles north of Nairobi, in the foothills of Mount Kenya. During the Mau-Mau emergency of the 1950s it had been an internment camp. The head teacher had been interned there and now led the school. He was much influenced by the East African Revival beginning in the 1930s. Through his mission to me I began the journey to Christian faith for myself.

The second was in 1990 and 1991 when Caroline and I smuggled bibles and Christian literature – and for some reason a car axle – to two countries in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. We met clandestinely with Christian leaders from Pentecostal through Roman Catholic to Orthodox. Many had spent time in prison. The completeness of their commitment to the service of Christ was overwhelmingly impressive; the welcome to us without denominational tension witnessed to the reality of the Church universal.

¹ William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Word, 1973, page 147

From these two experiences we both gained a profound sense of the reality of the global church. While I was unpacking bibles and other books from the secret compartment in the car at one place, Caroline sat with a lady who spoke not a word of English or French. The words they had in common were 'alleluia' and 'amen'. Those two kept a less than entirely lively conversation going for nearly an hour.

The global church and the world in which it exists is neither simply an object of aid or mission – something to which we do things – nor simply a complication and obstacle to the otherwise sufficiently challenging life of the Church of and in the UK - something to be ignored. It is a dynamic and rapidly changing swirling mass of bodies, cultures and existence, a complex ecosystem blown into life by the Holy Spirit.

The Anglican Communion by itself is somewhere around 70-80 million people in 165 countries. Its average member is a woman in her 30s, in the Global South, probably Africa, very poor indeed and likely to be experiencing conflict or persecution. She speaks one of more than 2,000 languages of the Communion. I have met Anglicans who run investment banks or research into quantum computing or nano technology: I have met an Anglican with an engineering degree from Heriot-Watt, whose still living grandfather was the first person in his people group to see a wheel.

The world in which the church exists interacts with the church in the Providence of God: the world contains other physical and social ecosystems but overall there is one God and Spirit of creation and sustaining. There is one divine intention and teleology for all, and one salvation, reconciliation and redemption for all.

The church exists for God's mission in the world: it is God's gift to the world. Around the world the church is shaped in ten thousand ways by the culture of the world: in its turn it shapes the sociality of the world, all through the embracing and extensive work of the Spirit of Christ.

In an address in Princeton in 1994 Professor Dan Hardy lamented the lack of ecclesiology, our sense of the nature of the church². That is certainly true in England. We debate a great deal about what we should do, what we should look like, how we should live, and how we should tell the rest of the country how to live. We do not speak much about what we are.

Yet we are what we are in our social life, life together, and in the Anglican traditions shaped not by confessionalism but by our prayer and worship, the ever-swirling, ever changing mass of habits and practices that shapes our mission globally. The churches here are not Christianity in one country, to misquote Stalin, yet we must live in society as the churches in one country. Every church is both autonomous and utterly interdependent, local and global, and both characteristics are in a tornado of change.

A few months back I spoke with the European head of a major 'tech' company. They commented that the last 12 months have accelerated that process of global and local interactions technologically so that we have covered the next 10 years of foreseen change in one year. We are not able to put that genie back in the bottle.

Dan Hardy spoke of the church as a spiral interaction with the world, constantly changing and developing. Perhaps it is more like a vast murmuration of starlings, swirling and altering in response to threats and to change around them. Perhaps there are aspects of the DNA double helix, sufficient yet necessarily affected by the environment and its own nature.

² The Future of the Church: An Exploration

Whatever metaphor one uses, the church is constantly changing as it interacts with the world: at the same time the world changes as it interacts with the church. And all is under the Spirit whom we do not see except with the eyes of faith.

Three years ago, in that mythical age before Covid-19, after much work the political and religious leaders of South Sudan were gathered in the Vatican, for a meeting led by the Pope, a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and me. That alone was unprecedented, to have the three churches working so closely together. So was the outcome. There is a clip on YouTube of the leaders, weeping, as the Pope, kneeling at their feet, implored them to make peace. It was not a lone decisive moment, but it was a possible turning point in a war that had cost 400,000 lives.

The world changes the church: the church changes the world. The Holy Spirit breathes and blows over all from the individual to the cosmos.

The dynamic, interactive relationship between church and world has been accelerated through Covid. The world has come closer, but relationships have not changed. That interaction between world, Spirit and church in providential and divine wisdom-shaped drama calls for a church that can improvise in beauty and love and holiness or, as Stringfellow says, it will react in self-protection and succumb to death. Dance anew or die most certainly!

That is what we see in the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples are together at one moment in prayer; the wind of the Spirit blows. They cascade out and as they proclaim the wonders of God in the tongues this Spirit has given, every nation of the Roman Empire hears the word of God. And so the movement begins – continually they are driven out and on. They go to Jerusalem, to Judaea and Samaria and to the whole world. It is a pattern that is repeated in the Acts.

By persecution, by vision, by miracle, by Spiritual passion, the church moves outwards. Whenever it seems to settle down another great gale blows.

Thus, it reaches to the Gentiles, transforming the church's nature into the multicultural, dancing and developing shape it has been ever since.

Thus, it encounters persecution and whether out of necessity or vocation reaches to India and the far north of China before 500 AD.

Thus, it is shaped and shapes the world, but in all the shaping the moving force is that of God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and will not allow the church to stultify and dry up in a forgotten valley of bones.

When the world is shaken by cataclysmic events, of war, plague, economic crisis and death – and indeed the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear to have been working well beyond the European Working Time Directive in the last 18 months – then the dance of the church is reshaped, the song changes and fresh improvisation is called for.

When the way we live in the world is transformed inside a generation, when in my pocket I have the means to hear from every Primate in the Anglican Communion, about their family illnesses, about the death of a sister from Covid-19, the threats from terrorists, the pressures of the economy; then the world has changed more in 30 years than in the century after Caxton founded his printing works. Then the dance of the church must be reshaped, and fresh improvisation is called for. For our historic patterns will no longer set us free

but will imprison us. We will become a church of rule-bound death not a church of liberating improvisation in the dance of the Spirit.

What is church extension abroad when abroad is reaching you hourly through a smart phone?

The fresh improvisation of the church's dance in the wind of the Spirit is simultaneously local and global. The nature of Pentecost is simultaneously to embrace abundant diversity and earthed locality in the story of God's work in the cosmos and in human history. Yet it is only recognisably Pentecost and valid extension when it liberates.

In the local the Church has a visible and incarnate life together which is called to be a witness to Jesus Christ as the one who came from the Father. It is the product of the Holy Spirit, the visible community that should show faith as normal and God's presence as known.

So much easier said than done! The local is also the place of the coffee rota and chair moving. It is the place of church council discussions on the colour of the tiles in the new toilets. It is the person who tends to sit near you and always sing out of tune – what a blessing 'no singing' has been to those unfortunate enough to sit near me.

It is the chaplaincy and the call at 2 a.m. to go to a ward where a new-born may not survive the night and the terrified parents will cry out to any God and look for compassion and tears with them. It is the place of the Trinity College chaplain in 1977 who walked me round and round the Fellows' Garden on the day I heard of my father's death until late at night I could sleep.

The local church is the improvising place of dances where we tread on toes, get the rhythm wrong and yet the Holy Spirit breathes life into the dance.

The local churches of every sort are those that in the last year have in the vast majority gone online. They have set up local links and reached out to those who were overwhelmed, with food and consolation, with advice and sheer company. They are the ones who have set up networks for the elderly isolated and opened their doors to vaccination centres while the organist played requests.

They are the huts in the hills of Papua New Guinea, the Cathedrals in our cities. The local is where the dry bones sometimes lie and need the wind of the Spirit so that they move and breathe.

But the global and the local are meshing in a way we have never seen before. Until about 13 months ago Morning Prayer at Canterbury Cathedral was a quiet service with at most 20-25 people, lasting 20 minutes. When the current dreadful and abysmal Archbishop of Canterbury cravenly concurred with the Government's order to lock down the churches - long may his name be obscured in infamy [you are welcome to applaud that bit] - the Dean of Canterbury went online in his garden. He was sometimes accompanied by his cats, or pigs, or Guinea Fowl. Today the network that links to Canterbury Morning Prayer is almost 10,000 strong, all round the world, and in Canada small groups are going online for bible study, prayer and mutual spiritual encouragement. Find it on YouTube.

What is local? In the service he briefly unpacks a reading and explains it, to encourage faith. Is that not church extension?

Similar things have happened in alpha courses, are happening on a reconciliation course called Difference in the USA, DRC, UK and many other places - not all of which only exist with initials (a course developed at Lambeth and online— end of commercial break).

I am not saying the world is getting smaller. It is not. When a Bishop in South Sudan WhatsApp's to say he is in a refugee camp under shell fire, the closeness of conversation does not shrink the difference in circumstances. The world is not getting smaller. It is both more connected and more isolated. It knows far more and relates far less.

How does the church dance as inequality is more visible but technology enables the gaps of wealth, security and comfort to be growing?

At a national level, the same is happening. Covid-19 has stripped the paper off the cracks of our inequalities. Climate-change, technology, genetics, robotics, nanotechnology and much more overhang our future, in some case for bad, in others with both promise and threat. We need to work with their impact locally and globally lest they risk deepening inequalities of resource, education, housing and all foundations of hope.

When the world is playing so many new tunes, some of lament and others of gladness, how is the church to be the home of improvisation to the Spirit, the source of liberation?

The moment of Pentecost, so beautifully prophesied in the book of Ezekiel, sets the pattern of the dance of the church in the world through the ages.

First, because it is a moment of creation. Not of a church alone but of a people, a nation. Luke sets the context as one which calls on the memories of the founding of Israel with the gift of the law at Sinai, also celebrated at Shavuot this weekend. But here, as later in the Acts of the Apostles, it is not for one people but for the whole world, for all hear and all are drawn into this new social body, the church. As Peter puts it in I Peter 2, writing to the churches of south west Turkey, "but you are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, God's own people". The church divided, sinful and human is yet God's, a place of the miracle of some sort of commonality or unity in diversity beyond imagining. It is driven out as a body of sinners to live in the sanctity of the Holy Spirit. It is the world's greatest nation, yet without frontiers, or prisons, or armies.

The church must improvise afresh - not by abandoning the past but reimagining the dance of the present, which will change again and again.

It must set down its divisions where they inhibit the dance of love.

It must be driven with hearts on fire with the love of God for all, inside and outside. It must not be static, self-imprisoning, sleeping in its sins of the past.

It must be welcoming to all people, but not all actions. It must, to adjust Jesus' words in Luke 9, lose its life to gain it. That means practically, to sit lightly to its privilege, its hierarchies, its money - rather than gain all those and forfeit its soul.

How that dance looks will be different in every place. We are in a world where local and global are at the same time brought together in communication and distanced in love because they know the outside of the communication not the inside of the heart. A church that remains unchanged, that does not hear the music of Spirit will, to quote Dan Hardy, become a dinosaur. As far as we know, dinosaurs did not dance.

Stringfellow again:

“The citizen of Jerusalem is an alien in Babylon. Hope is reliance upon grace in the face of death; the issue is that of receiving life as a gift, not as a reward, not as a punishment; hope is living constantly, expectantly, patiently, resiliently, joyously in the efficacy of the word of God.”³

The last year has changed the world, the next 50 years will do so even more. Science will change war and peace. Climate change will move vast populations. Amidst such change the church around the world will know more about each other and may choose to let the Spirit of God equip it as it is driven out into the changing world, or may seek protection by hiding behind what it has always known. The former is to choose life. The latter is to choose death.

Ezekiel responds to God’s questions, “Lord, you know”. Faced with such change we cannot say more. Faced with such change we must, as the first disciples at Pentecost, call on the Spirit of God. If we do not we will go down. If we do call we will be driven out into all the complexity and muddle of the world, but we will go out with good news, in the faithfulness of Christ, improvising a new dance in a new world, bringing a new freedom ... all to the glory of God.

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³ Ibid page 138